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ABSTRACT

Knowing the connections between ideas and the interrelationships among groups of ideas is a skill that can be useful throughout the writing process. Writers who are aware of the meaning relationships existing between sentences and ideas can discover the logical possibilities inherent in their topic at the prewriting stage, determine patterns for development at the organizing stage, develop their content at the writing stage, and expand or reduce for improved emphasis at the revising stage. Sixteen meaning relationships have been identified for use and study by student writers, including (1) related action, (2) parallel idea, (3) contrast, (4) alternative, (5) balanced comparison, (6) result, (7) cause, (8) question, (9) answer, (10) definition, (11) amplification, (12) sample item, (13) sample fact, (14) supporting data, (15) generalization, and (16) inference. Meaning relationships can be especially useful in the revision stage, where students can read their rough drafts line by line for the purpose of expanding ideas by time, place, person, thing, reason, result, example, enumeration, addition, transition, restatement, and summation. The application of these connective relationships can help students combine and subordinate the ideas they present in their writing, thereby improving the coherence of the writing. (RL)

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Claude L. Gibson

Speaker 3, Session D20

Cognition & Cohesion

in Writing -C-

How an Understanding of Meaning Relationships Complements Writing as Process

When the National Assessment of Educational Progress test results for 35,000 Texas nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-olds were released in 1978, the state was shocked to learn that eighty-one percent of the students had failed the writing section, seventeen percent met minimum standard, and a mere two percent exceeded the minimum. Nationally, the results left much to be desired, with sixty-six percent failing, thirty percent meeting the minimum, and four percent above that. What especially concerned the Texas teachers of writing was the report that "Texas students in all three age groups used fewer total words per essay and fewer sentences and paragraphs per essay than did their national counterparts."[1]

Through teacher inservice training programs and new priorities for classroom instruction, Texans are confronting the problem; and the degree of their success is being measured annually by the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) test. A look at the 1980 writing test results reveals considerable improvement, with forty percent failing, fifty-eight percent mastering minimum competency, and again two percent surpassing the minimum--better, I think we would agree, but less than optimum.[2] The 1981 TABS results were comparable to those of 1980--encouraging but, as one newspaper leader ran, not good enough.[3]

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Examining the other sections of the test on writing skills, one learns that students are doing relatively well on matters concerning the individual sentence. Competency in such matters as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage, sentence structure, and commonly used forms have ranged as high as ninety-two percent to as low as sixty-seven percent. Students are handling the basic sentence with some facility; the problem arises when they are asked to deal with two or more sentences--that is, extended composition.

Because we teachers have learned a great deal about the process of writing over the last several years, we are doing a much better job in helping our students to discover what they want to communicate and find more to communicate. And attention to the writing process--prewriting, writing, and revising--is teaching them how to communicate.

As the director of freshman English at Texas A&M, I work under the assumption that the majority of our students enter the University from that pool of fifty-eight percent minimum competency and two percent above. Of these students about nine percent are able to test out of the first course in the freshman sequence; two percent, out of the second. Eligibility for exemption is earned by performance on the English Achievement Test and submitted writing sample. The predominant shortcomings in the writing of those who fail to qualify for any exemption lay broadly in the areas of unity, coherence, and emphasis--problems, I am given to understand, not limited to the geographical boundaries of Texas.

Those of you who read College English will recall Wayne C. Booth's delightfully witty satire "A Report on the Failure of Idecom."[4] It's a playful consideration of the process v. product controversy. Booth recounts that IDECOM was the result of an attempt "to find some way to teach genuine coherence, coherence of ideas, not words."[5] "The Assumption [of its proponents] was that putting ideas

together is a skill at least as difficult as piano playing, that it therefore cannot be taught as a series of propositions but rather must be taught as a sustained and developing practice, an art taught as one would teach any art."[6] Students mastering IDECOM would have "learned to join not just words with words, not just sentences with sentences, not just paragraphs with paragraphs, but IDEMES with IDEMES" [major ideas controlling many lesser ones]; most importantly, would have learned to pass the fan test and understood "that unless everything joins, with every joint matching in force the true quality of the connection, it is BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD."[7]

While students proved they could master the art, the venture itself turned out indeed Quixotic as other teachers, editors, even writers, and certainly lazy students reacted violently en masse. Properly chastened, Booth claims to have given in to the more popular program of Projects in Discomposition, Discommunication, and Liberation (PIDDL).

Although on the surface Booth's piece suggests that the process oriented group and the product oriented group are at loggerheads and that the teaching of writing is an either/or proposition, the essential message is this shouldn't be so, not if we wish to enlarge the ranks of our students writing above minimum competency--that two percent in Texas and four percent nationally. Fortunately, there are a number of texts available telling us how this might be accomplished. It is what they suggest that I would like to bring to your attention today.

In Writing Good Prose (4th ed. NY: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1977) Alexander Jones and Claude Faulkner use the understanding of meaning relationships as the basis for teaching students how to write clear, coherent, effective prose. With knowledge of the connections between ideas and the interrelationships among groups of ideas, writers can discover the logical possibilities inherent in their topic at the prewriting stage, determine patterns for development at the organizing stage, develop their content at the writing stage, and expand or reduce for improved emphasis at the revising stage.

The sixteen meaning relationships which Jones and Faulkner consider and which I shall illustrate briefly and simply with main clause pairs are as follows:

1. Related Action

   Here the first sentence will state an action. The second sentence will mention a second. Together, they will indicate a chronological sequence.

   Example: Joyce read the letter silently. When she had finished, she tossed it into the wastebasket.

2. Parallel Idea

   The two main clauses will constitute an enumeration of equivalent ideas, repeating the subject and usually employing parallelism of structure.

   Example: This book presents a biased analysis of Kennedy's foreign policy, and it contains many serious factual errors.

3. Contrast

   The two clauses will present important points of difference.

   Example: My father has always wanted me to become an engineer. I have decided, however, that I would rather be a physician.

4. Alternative

   The first clause makes a statement to which the second presents an alternative possibility.

   Example: The legislature may find it necessary to increase the state sales tax. One alternative would be to add a surcharge to the state income tax.

5. Balanced Comparison

Here two clauses indicate significant points of similarity, with the comparison involving a comparison of entire clauses.

Example: Although ultraviolet light speeds the healing of wounds, prolonged exposure to it can cause the destruction of body tissue. Similarly, although X-rays destroy cancer cells, prolonged exposure to them can produce malignant growths.

6. Result

The second clause will present a consequence or effect of a situation or condition described in the first clause.

Example: My sister has the annoying habit of using my jeans, sweaters, and skirts without asking permission. Consequently, when I can't find something, I don't know whether it's lost, strayed, stolen--or borrowed again.

7. Cause

Cause is the opposite of result. It gives a reason or cause for a situation or condition described in the previous clause.

Example: Nancy missed her eight o'clock class. She overslept.

8. Question

The second clause will ask a rhetorical question suggested by the preceding statement.

Example: Dutch elm disease is threatening the trees in our community. Is there anything we can do to combat this blight?

9. Answer

If the first of two linked clauses asks a question, the second may present an answer.

Example: Why did the United States fight in Korea? Without a doubt, we fought to defend our own interests.

10. Definition

Here the second clause will define a term presented in the first clause.

a. Formal

If the definition is formal, the second clause follows a prescribed form: Term = Class + Difference(s).

Example: In fine perfume, an almost indispensable ingredient is ambergris. This is the grayish, waxy substance which forms in the body of a sick sperm whale.

b. Informal

If the definition is informal, the second clause restates the information of the first clause in different and somewhat more specific words.

Example: The manufacturers favored a protective tariff. They wanted customs duties which would be high enough to eliminate foreign competition.

11. Amplification

The second clause will expand into an assertion an anticipatory noun contained in the first clause.

Example: We heard an exciting rumor. It was that school would be dismissed during the basketball tournament.

12. Sample Item

The first clause must name a class so that the second clause may give one or more sample items which are members of the class.

Example: Many hardy birds remain in Indiana through the winter. One of these is the cardinal.

13. Sample Fact

The first clause presents a general assertion, and the second, with parallel structure, a sample fact included within that assertion.

Example: My cousin enjoys strange foods. She is very fond of chocolate-covered ants.

14. Supporting Data

The second clause offers support of a hypothesis made in the first clause.

Example: It was probably a fox that disturbed his chickens last night. Its tracks were plentiful in the soft mud near the hen house.

15. Generalization

Generalization is the opposite of sample fact. The first clause gives one or more concrete, specified facts. The second presents a new and broader non-controversial idea.

Example: Jerry Morton goes ice fishing as often as he can. In fact, all my friends participate in winter sports whenever possible.

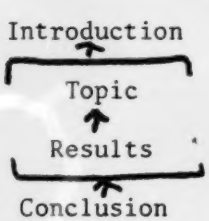
16. Inference

Inference is the opposite of supporting data. The first clause gives the evidence or facts on which a hypothesis, or conclusion, in the second clause may be based.

Example: The seal across the flap of the envelope has been broken. Someone must have read the top-secret document.

Students with a sound knowledge of meaning relationships are in a better position to make use of the ideas derived from the many creating techniques of the prewriting stage. For example, a ten-minute looping exercise on extrasensory perception might produce what Cowan and Cowan in Writing (NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1980, p. 10) call a center of gravity sentence expressing the essence of what was said in the loop such as "Many scientists are displaying an increased interest in extrasensory perception." Students would recognize a number of options: they could define extrasensory perception, give data to support the the claim of increased interest, present one or more examples of scientists displaying such interest, suggest probable causes or results of the increased interest--to name but a few.

Following such activities as brainstorming, cubing, listing, the meaning relationships could be used as the basis for ordering or organizing the resultant ideas into a sensible outline. Or, if students prefer, students can wait until they have come up with a thesis and tentative outline, which could then be tested for coherence of overall structure. Diagramming of an outline helps students to understand the relationship between the outline and the essay itself. For instance,



Wind Generated Electrical Power

1. Introduction. New source of energy needed
2. I. Amount of available wind energy enormous
3. II. Development of efficient wind-energy systems under way
4. Conclusion. Future of such systems promising

At the writing stage, the meaning relationships should act as a continuous catalyst for ideas assuring coherent development.

But perhaps the most important application comes at the revising stage of the writing process. Some students, particularly the more skilled ones, may find using meaning relationships prior to revision either intrusive or too mechanical. They can produce drafts with some facility. Students with lesser skills, however, generally find early incorporation very beneficial. Both groups will find meaning relationships extremely helpful in expanding or reducing the content of drafts to attain proper balance and emphasis for the final draft.

Robert Marzano and Philip DiStefano in The Writing Process (NY: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1981) integrate meaning relationship consideration into the revision stage. They think it is most suitable then because students have the essentials on paper, essentials that can be modified with purpose and audience specifically in mind. Marzano and DiStefano recommend reading the rough draft line by line first for the purpose of expanding by time, place, person, thing, reason, result, example, enumeration, addition, transition, restatement, and summation. Using their list, one could expand the ideas is this paragraph sentence by sentence, even expanding on the expansion, as follows:

EXPANSION THROUGH MEANING RELATIONSHIPS & ADDITION

Twelve basic ways to expand on an idea in an essay:

1. expansion by time,
2. expansion by place,
3. expansion by person,
4. expansion by thing,
5. expansion by reason,
6. expansion by result,
7. expansion by example,
8. expansion by enumeration,
9. expansion by addition,
10. expansion by transition,
11. expansion by restatement, and
12. expansion by summation.

Using the above list, one could expand the following paragraph sentence by sentence, even expanding on the expansion, as follows:

Original

All learning is the result of some kind of experience that has happened in the past. The simplest kind of learning is the result of experience that involves the motor nerves, those nerves that control the muscles. When a person touches a hot stove, he jerks his hand back quickly because he feels pain. The next time, the individual will certainly avoid such an incident. We learn through experience by the method of trial and error.

Expansion

All learning is the result of some kind of experience that has happened in the past. (11) Our actions in the present are based on experiences we have already had. (6) Unfortunately, an implication of this is that we may not have as much free will as we think we do. The simplest kind of learning is the result of experience that involves the motor nerves, those nerves that control the muscles. When a person touches a hot stove, he jerks his hand back quickly because he feels pain. (4) The pain is generally intense initially, subsiding into a persistent throbbing in the irritated area. (10) However, in cases of severe burn, the intensity of the pain remains for much longer periods. The next time the individual will certainly avoid such an incident. We learn through experience by the method of trial and error.

Adapted from Robert J. Marzano and Philip DiStefano's "Chapter Seven: Expansion and Reduction," The Writing Process (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1981), pp. 132-145.

Once the expansion phase is completed, students should then reread their draft looking for opportunities in reduction, reducible sentences being those that repeat a number of words from a previous sentence or that evidence an identifiable meaning relationship with a preceding sentence. Audience, purpose, and emphasis determine the efficacy of any combination or subordination. The result should be improved coherence. Of course, the same procedure could be followed with Jones and Faulkner's sixteen meaning relationships in mind.

If we are really serious about helping our students, we should teach them something about meaning relationships. Without that understanding they may squander the many real gains offered by creating techniques of prewriting, teeter at the brink of minimum competency, and settle for PIDDL at a time when scholarship and teachers are showing how students may achieve so much more--effective communication for all of the ordinary purposes of life. Three cheers for IDECOM!

Notes

[1] "Young Texans Reported Short on Writing Skills," The Houston Post, 12 Nov 1978, p. 8A.

[2] "Texas 9th-Graders' Scores 'Not Good Enough,'" The Houston Post, 12 Jul 1980, pp. 1, 27A.

[3] "TABS Tells Students' Needs," The Eagle, 22 Jun 1981, pp. 1A-2A.

[4] College English, 43, No. 2(Feb 1981), 111-121.

[5] Booth, p. 113.

[6] Booth, p. 114.

[7] Booth, p. 115.